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Transport system generates concern

BY DOUG STALEY
Anderson Independent-Mail

For two years, Doug Wright, chief executive officer of SENIOR Solutions, lobbied South Carolina officials not to change its system of providing non-emergency transportation for Medicaid patients.

Since the state made a switch to

The biggest problem was absorbing those increases quickly, but we have beefed up things pretty substantially. There were time element issues, but we've worked hard to overcome them."

Residents and medical professionals told state officials at a meeting in Greenville earlier this week that changes to the state

L a broker-based system in May, Mr. Wright said his agency has experienced a 40 percent increase in patient trips in Anderson County and a 70 percent rise in Greenville County.

"There are lots of issues and expectations," Mr. Wright said. "At first, we were overwhelmed, and there were times we were late ...

transport system were putting patients at risk. There were reports at the meeting of transports arriving late to take patients to doctor appointments and, in some cases, not at all.

In the past, the South Carolina Department of Health and Human

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Services contracted directly with transportation companies to provide services for non-emergency cases. The state changed to the new system in May to improve efficiency and accountability and save taxpayer dollars, said Jeff Stensland, Health and Human Services Department spokesman.

"Instead of the providers contracting directly with us, now they are contracting with the broker," Mr. Stensland said. "We wanted to provide safe and reliable transportation to those who need it and make sure taxpayers are getting a better value."

State officials opted to enter into five-year contracts with Missouri-based Medical Transport Management Inc., which covers the Upstate, and LogistiCare, of Atlanta.

With Medical Transport Management acting as the middleman, Mr. Wright said his agency has been asked to make more transports because it uses lift vans, which cost less to operate than ambulances.

Scott Lesiak, chief administrative officer for Medshore Ambulance Service in Anderson, said the company sold some of its lift vans to SENIOR Solutions in anticipation of the changeover.

"We knew we would have an excess of vehicles, and they inquired about it," Mr. Lesiak said. "We haven't had that much of a problem on the ambulance side, but there was a lot of volume dumped on them."

No matter the system, Mr. Wright said SENIOR Solutions is interested in

providing the best service possible to residents who use Medicaid.

"They are probably one of the neediest groups in the state and have the least voice," he said.

Mr. Stensland said the Health and Human Services Department changed to a broker system to improve accountability and efficiency.

He said there had been a steep increase in the last four years in the cost of providing for non-emergency calls.

There were no accountability or restraints under the old system and, in some cases, providers were dispatching ambulances for patient transports when a smaller vehicle would have sufficed, he said.

"We saw a lot of fraud and abuse in the system,"

said Mr. Stensland. "We're finding out more after we implemented the broker system. There was a lack of oversight on our part."

Mr. Stensland said only a small number of the total transports under the new system have generated complaints. The 47,534 Medical Transport Management trips in May generated filing of 499 complaints, he said.

Although he was unable to provide any statistics for June, Mr. Stensland said the number of complaints have decreased. To address patients' concerns, a committee has been established to investigate.

"We take these (complaints) very seriously," Mr. Stensland said. "Obviously it's a major issue to those it happens to."

The state agency entered into three-year contracts

with Medical Transport Management and LogistiCare with the option to extend for an additional two years. Mr. Stensland said the contracts can be terminated at any time for non-performance. At this time, the agency is taking a wait-and-see approach.

Rep. Michael Thompson, R-Anderson, said he and several area state lawmakers recently met with fire and rescue transport squads in Pelzer to discuss their concerns about the new system.

He said it appears some vendors are providing more of a curb-to-curb service, and aren't offering the same level of assistance offered under the old plan.

"It's not just restricted here, but it's a big mess everywhere," Rep. Thompson said. "That just leaves an enormous disservice to people who rely on this and aren't mobile."

He said separate bills introduced in the South Carolina General Assembly before the end of this year's legislative session requested an audit of the Health and Human Services Department and its contracts with Medical Transport Management and LogistiCare.

The bills remain in the House Ways and Means Committee and likely will be picked up in next year's legislative session.

"It still leaves the question of what happens now," Rep. Thompson said. "If the contracts were signed for certain period unless they default, our hands are tied ... Something has to be done, this problem has to be addressed."

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